

Student Literacy Improvement Project (SLIP)

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Background and rationale

In case you're worried about what's going to become of the younger generation, it's going to grow up and start worrying about the younger generation.

Roger Allen (U.S. Congressman 1954-1968)



There is a commonly held belief amongst many teaching staff in Higher Education that the standard of most students is not what it once was, and in particular that students' standard of literacy has declined markedly in recent years.

There is nothing new in this – history records that we have never thought that the 'youth of today' quite match the standards that, for example, we the students of yesteryear, achieved.

However we ought to recognise that as we now take nearly 40% of School and College leavers into HE and are being asked to increase that to 50%, then we are bound to encounter students with a different skills mix to those that we have traditionally taught. It may be that this will manifest itself in a level of literacy that falls short of that of the students many lecturers with 10, 15 or 20 years teaching experience will have encountered.

A total of 24% of the adult population of England is estimated to have poor literacy. This can be broken down as follows: 15% have low literacy: 5.5% have lower literacy: 4.5% have very low literacy. (The Basic Skills Agency, 2001)

Possibly as many as somewhere between 5 and 10% of our students have literacy difficulties. For the Business School (UWBS) that means anything between 20 and 40 level one students each year are held back by their inability to express themselves as accurately as they would wish in their written work.

At present we attempt to help students by running workshops - *and usually students don't turn up*. We write 'sp' or 'gr' or 'unclear' on their work - *but they already know that*. It is very likely that students with literacy difficulties will have been told about it many times during their school / college career. What they have not had, or have not acted upon, is specific diagnosis of the particular problem and advice on how to remedy any deficiencies.

The innovation

It was identified that what was required was a straightforward diagnostic tool that uses a shared vocabulary understood by both tutor and students, and that specifies what the student needs to improve upon and how to go about it.

This would be a joint investigation involving the University Business School and two sizeable Tertiary Colleges in Shropshire and aimed at the identification / development of learning and teaching resources to improve the written English capability of students in HE levels 0/1 and which would also be applicable to students in the FE / Tertiary Sector.

The objectives/outcomes would be

- The establishment of the extent and nature of the literacy problems of students studying at HE level 0/1, and of those hoping to move on to HE study.
- The development/identification of a suitable diagnostic tool.
- The development/identification of appropriate learning resources to address the issue.
- The trial of both the diagnostic tool and learning resources in Semester Two of 2002/3, and their utilization in academic year 2003/04.

The outcomes

Progress has been made on the identification of required (level one) standards within UWBS and comparison with expectations and standards held by the Partner FE Institutions, although a difficulty here has been the implementation this past year (2002 /03) of a new level one portfolio within UWBS, out of which our 'expected' standards were still emerging.

After considerable research amongst the standards of the plethora of UK based qualification awarding bodies it has been possible to devise a suitable, and relatively straightforward diagnostic tool that will give us an analysis of students' literacy difficulties.

Such a tool should have clarity and be linked to the National Adult Literacy Standards at Level 2 (the Intermediate level which equates to GCSE grades A-C and which has long been one of our benchmarks of literacy for entry into HE study)

Level of qualification	General		Vocationally-related	Occupational
5	Higher-level qualifications BTEC Higher Nationals			Level 5 NVQ
4				Level 4 NVQ
3 advanced level	A level	Free-standing mathematics units level 3	Vocational A level (Advanced GNVQ)	Level 3 NVQ
2 intermediate level	GCSE grade A*-C	Free-standing mathematics units level 2	Intermediate GNVQ	Level 2 NVQ
1 foundation level	GCSE grade D-G	Free-standing mathematics units level 1	Foundation GNVQ	Level 1 NVQ
Entry level	Entry level certificate			

Figure 1: Qualification levels

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority website – <http://www.qca.org.uk/nq/framework/>

N.B. There has been a review of the national qualifications framework since this university project completed.
Please check the website for the current framework.

Students will receive an assessment sheet as below with their first pieces of work, which will indicate to them if and where there is a need for improvement in their written work. This deliberately describes their skills in positive terms.

Student:	Tutor	Date		
Analysis of writing skill	Descriptors	Current level of ability		
		Emerging	Consolidating	Expert
1. Planning	Purpose, layout, context, draft/notes			
2. Format	Appropriately organised/structured			
3. Register	Informal/formal – appropriate to purpose and audience, vocabulary			
4. Writing Style	Sentence length, presentation of arguments			
5. Sentence complexity	Range of structures, use of relative clauses, use of passive voice			
6. Grammar	Accurate use of tenses, subject/verb agreement, use of pronouns			
7. Punctuation	Commas, inverted commas, apostrophes			
8. Spelling	Accurate specialist/technical terms			
9. Synthesis or summary	Extraction of relevant information and/or ideas from source documents			
10. Proof reading	Accuracy, meaning, content, expression			
Specific needs				

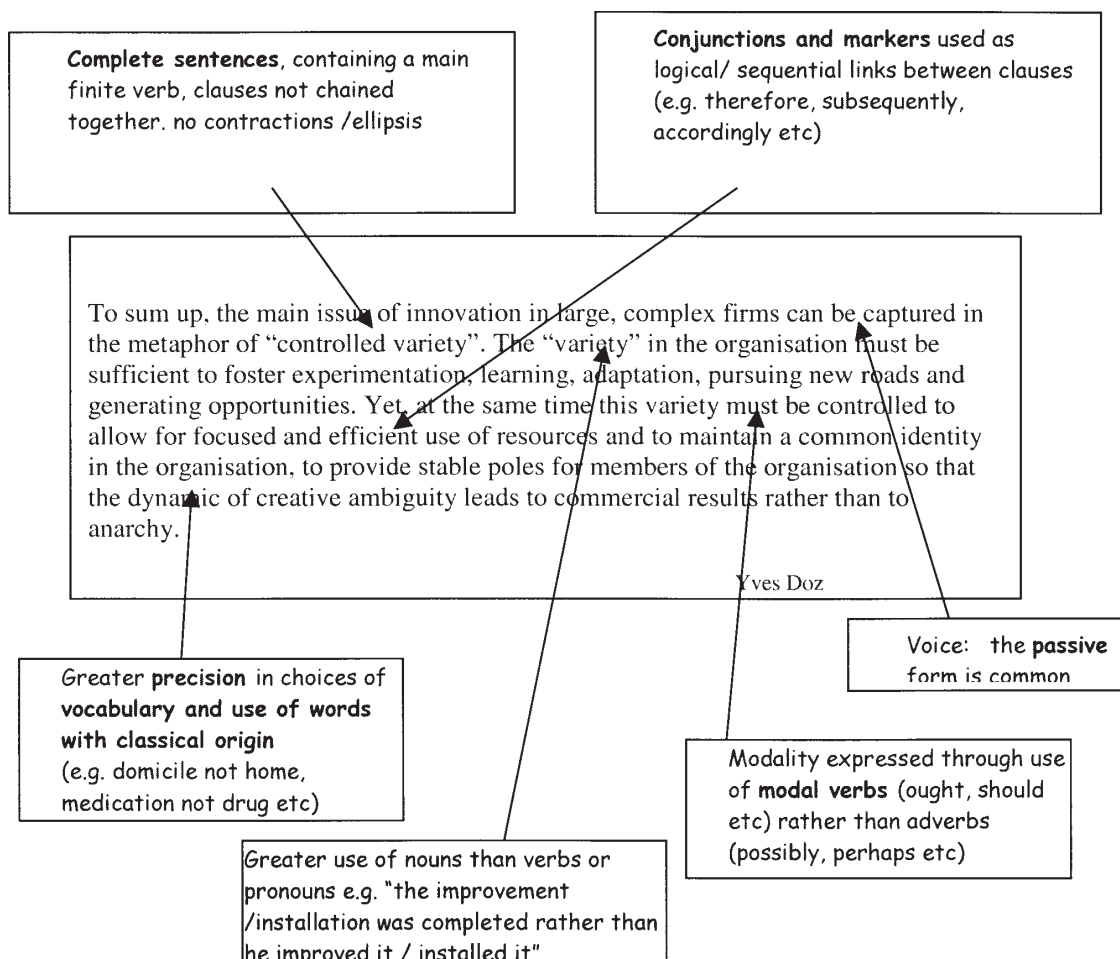
It is also designed to be easy for staff to complete.

Marking Guidance for Tutors		
1	Students work should be graded on a 3 point scale (by ticking relevant column)	
	Little evidence of required skill	emergency
	Some evidence of skill	consolidating
	Proficiency in this skill area	expert
2	It would be unrealistic to expect overseas students to demonstrate colloquial vocabulary but all students should be familiar with standard academic format and register (tone).	
3	Specific needs should be identified where student's skill gap may affect learning and presentation to such an extent that the main course work cannot be completed satisfactorily. Referral to Learning Support at UWBS/TCAT/New College may be appropriate	
4	Results should be fed back as positive, constructive advice on how to improve in specific areas with reference to recommended self-study activities and the reading list.	

Future Developments

Diagnosis of particular difficulties is only the first part of a wider and more long-term pattern of student support that we wish to provide. Students will typically have access to their Module Tutors, Award (Personal) Tutor, the Study Skills Advisers and the various on-line resources now made available by the University. However the research and development team felt that a text based resource geared to business students could and should be linked to the Assessment Sheet and that is now at pre-print stage. Each of the ten areas of writing skill is addressed by general advice, specific examples and exercises for the student to test their level of competence. Thus below we have part of the advice that a student experiencing difficulty with 'area 3' (Register) would be guided towards.

Key features of formal communication:



References

Basic Skills Agency (2001) in Learning and Skills Council, Shropshire Strategic Plan 2002-5, LSC 2002. www.lsc.gov.ac.uk